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SUBJECT: GOB RENEWS LEASE OF LEADING HUMAN RIGHTS NGO

REF: MINSK 066

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) On January 31, the GOB reversed a December 2006 decision and announced that it would renew the lease contract for the offices of the prominent human rights organization the Belarus Helsinki Committee (BHC) for one more year. The GOB denied any political motivation in its original cancellation of the lease, claiming that the decision resulted from the BHC's repeated late rental payments. In the context of recent difficulties with Russia, the GOB's concession to the BHC coupled with its repeated calls for dialogue with the U.S. and EU underscore the regime's efforts (albeit weak) to pretend that its image in the West is not completely tarnished. End summary.

GOB Extends BHC's Lease for One Year

¶2. (U) On January 31, the Belarusian authorities informed Belarusian Helsinki Committee (BHC) head Tatyana Protko that the lease on the BHC's office, which the GOB had annulled in December 2006 (reftel), had been extended for one more year under the current terms. The contract renewal ensures that the BHC, one of the three remaining registered human rights NGOs in Belarus, will possess a legal address for the next year, thus eliminating the immediate threat of liquidation. (Note: The BHC still faces a court trial over unpaid taxes on a foreign grant, but this case has been sitting for months. End note.) Protko commended the GOB's response as a step towards "understanding the European system of values" and thanked the U.S. and the EU for their strong public statements condemning the BHC's eviction.

GOB Denies Political Motivation in Lease Cancellation

¶3. (U) On January 31, Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson Andrey Popov dismissed allegations that the GOB intentionally evicted the BHC from its offices. Instead, he sought to explain to Belarus' "EU and U.S. partners" that the cancellation of the lease resulted from the BHC's constant late rent payments, despite a low rent subsidized by government discounts. (Note: BHC deputy Oleg Gulak told Emboff on January 26 that the BHC was late paying its rent only one time in 2006. End note.) Popov denied any political motivation in the GOB's original decision to cancel the lease and chastised the BHC leadership for duping the European Commission and the Department of State into "making strident political statements on a matter that does not exist."

Comment

14. (C) The renewal of the BHC's lease is a small victory for that NGO. The authorities' concession may be an indication that the GOB is concerned about its international reputation.

Given Belarus' recent difficulties with Russia, this concession to the BHC is aimed at encouraging the West to relax its restrictive measures against the regime. Only many additional and far more comprehensive concessions from the GOB, including the release of all political prisoners, would constitute a clear reversal from Lukashenko's repressive tactics.

Moore